

The
Mound Bayou
MISSISSIPPI Story



These fish men are in "bo's luck"
as they brought plenty of lunch and
drinks.



didn't bite (192)

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...sanctuary, refuge, oasis

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Mound Bayou, Mississippi, was for decades the shining example of African-American enterprise and self-government, not only in the Delta, but in the South and the entire country. At a time when most blacks in the South were working thankless sharecropping jobs for little or no pay, the citizens of Mound Bayou were founding banks, selling railroad tickets, milling cottonseeds, and farming their own land. At a time when blacks faced repercussions as severe as unemployment, eviction, or even death just for registering to vote, in Mound Bayou they were casting ballots in every election. In 1907, President Theodore Roosevelt spoke there from the back of a train, praising the all African-American community. His ten minute speech was telegraphed to the entire country. Booker T. Washington, a frequent visitor to the town, once wrote: "Outside of Tuskegee, I think that I can safely say there is no community in the world that I am so deeply interested in as I am in Mound Bayou."

Mound Bayou was also an oasis of sorts. While the rest of the state of Mississippi was segregated, inside the town limits there were no racial codes. The only exception was the railroad depot, at which the waiting room reserved for blacks was larger than the white side. White visitors to town stayed in homes, and none of the businesses maintained separate facilities, as was commonly done in the rest of the state. Blacks entered the front doors of restaurants rather than through the back, and the mayor, aldermen, constable, and town marshal were all duly elected. During the 1950s and '60s, when the rest of the Delta was a hornet's nest of intimidation and violence, black visitors and those sympathetic to the cause for racial equality knew they could find refuge there. Emmett Till's mother, Mamie Till, stayed there when she came down from Chicago to testify in the trial, two counties over, of the two white men who lynched her 14-year-old son. Civil rights workers from the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee, or SNCC, fled there when they were in hot water with the Delta's white establishment. "If a black person was running away, got in trouble, they knew if they ever made it to Mound Bayou, they wouldn't be bothered," longtime resident Nerissa Norman explains.



Booker T. Washington:

"Situated in the heart of the wide alluvial plain between the Mississippi and the Yazoo Rivers, Mound Bayou is the centre of a Negro population more dense than can be found anywhere else outside of Africa."

"In a certain sense, it may be said that the Mound Bayou town and colony have been a school in self-government for its colonists. They have had an opportunity there, such as Negro people have rarely had elsewhere, to learn the real meaning of political institutions and to prepare themselves for the duties and responsibilities of citizenship."

"The records of the mayor's court shows that, as Delta towns go, Mound Bayou is a remarkably quiet and sober place. There have been but two homicides in twenty years. Both of these were committed by strangers — men who drifted into the community in the early days before the local self-government and the traditions of the town had been established. During the whole twenty years of the town's existence, only three persons have been sent to the circuit court for trial. Two of these men were convicted of theft. Since the town obtained its charter in 1898, there have been, up to February 1907, but 163 criminal cases tried in the town. Of these, fifty were committed by strangers or by men who had come into town from the surrounding community."

A Town Owned by Negroes, Mound Bayou, Miss.,
An Example of Thrift and Self-Government. July, 1907.

Taborian Hospital:

*In his book *From Mutual Aid to the Welfare State*, social historian David J. Beito describes this facility as cutting edge for its time: "When the Taborian Hospital opened in 1942, the final cost of construction had been over \$100,000. The facilities included two major operating rooms, an X-ray room, a sterilizer, incubators, an electrocardiograph, a blood bank, and a laboratory. The hospital usually had two or three doctors on the staff; all were black. In 1944 annual dues of \$8.40 entitled an adult to thirty-one days of hospitalization, including major and minor surgery; the dues also covered a \$200 burial policy. The fee for a child was \$1.20 per year for the same services and a \$50 burial policy."*

So how did this aberration of a tiny Delta town, this all-black utopian community now a quaint back-roads hamlet, come to be? The story begins in 1887. It was then that Isaiah T. Montgomery, a great man of letters and educated conviction, and a band of other former slaves stepped off a railroad coach and began clearing the dense swamp wilderness. The 840-acre site, which Montgomery and his business partner Benjamin Green had purchased at \$7 an acre, included a large prehistoric Indian mound at the confluence of two bayous, deriving the new settlement's name. The work of erecting the town was long and arduous. The founders cut down trees, drained bayous, built up the land, fought off wild animals, and lived as frontiersmen, incorporating the town on July 12, 1887, and making it one of the oldest African-American incorporations in the US. "It was not the ordinary Negro farmer who was attracted to Mound Bayou colony," according to Booker T. Washington. "It was rather an earnest and ambitious class prepared to face the hardships of this sort of pioneer work." Isaiah T. Montgomery didn't come from any ordinary Negro farm. He

was a complex man, born into slavery, and eventually voting to disenfranchise his own race in the Mississippi Constitutional Convention. He grew up at Davis Bend, a plantation owned by Jefferson Davis' brother, Joseph, in an unusual slave system that encouraged education and social hierarchy. This arrangement was inspired during a stage coach ride on which Joseph Davis met Robert Owen, a Scottish utopian philosopher, and adapted the ideals of the utopian movement to his plantation. Montgomery's well-educated father kept accounts for the Davis family, operated the post office, and marketed the crops harvested from the plantation. At nine years of age, Isaiah worked in Davis' office, sorting and filing letters, and lived in his master's home. Eventually, he became a special attendant to Davis. The Montgomery family managed the plantation through much of the Civil War, and purchased it after the war ended. The farm became a prosperous colony of freedmen for nearly two decades, and was at one point the third largest cotton producer in the South. Severe winter weather coupled with the migration of some 20 families to Kansas during the Exoduster Movement forced the Montgomerys to sell out. While his brother William bought farm land in

North Dakota and Canada, I.T. Montgomery bought swamp land from the Louisville, New Orleans and Texas Railroad Company, and founded Mound Bayou.

So the establishment of Mound Bayou's government and economy is rooted in nearly two generations of experience managing a large plantation. Once land was cleared for farming, stores and other small businesses opened for business. In 1904, the Bank of Mound Bayou was established and it was soon followed by the Mound Bayou Loan and Investment Company. At one point, the town had three schools, 40 businesses, a half-dozen churches, a train depot, a post office, a newspaper, three cotton gins, a cottonseed oil mill, a zoo, a Carnegie public library, and a swimming pool, all African-American owned, operated, and patronized. The Taborian Hospital, built by the Twelve Knights and Daughters of Tabor and recognized as the first HMO in the United States, is the second oldest fraternal hospital in Mississippi. It was the primary healthcare provider to African Americans in the Delta before a competing hospital opened across the street.

Mound Bayou had become the self-governing and self-sustaining all black community that Isaiah T. Montgomery had envisioned. It eventually grew to some 4,000 inhabitants, who communally owned 30,000 acres of land and produced 3,000 bales of cotton and 2,000 bushels of corn annually on 6,000 acres of farmland. In recent decades, the town has taken the same economic dive as many small Delta towns. Its downtown is mostly burned down or boarded up. But the charity of local agencies—among them, St. Gabriel's Mercy Center, Eagle Music & Media Academy, and the Kemetec Institute—continue to embody the spirit that secured Mound Bayou's place in history as a center of African-American culture in the United States. ■



**G.W. Burt,
Photographer**

"According to A.P. Hood, Burt was 'the man behind the camera.' He apparently came from somewhere near Oxford, Mississippi but had been in Mound Bayou for the past ten years when Hood published *The Negro at Mound Bayou* in 1909. With that in mind, Burt would have arrived around 1899. Hood goes on to say that Burt's studio was 'nicely arranged' with displays and exhibits of his photographs and views and that he was the only photographer in town as he enjoyed a 'mono-poly.' Furthermore his fees were quite reasonable despite his monopoly and he enjoyed 'a great deal of patronage from the neighboring towns and communities', which would explain why whites employed his services."

- Lynn Linnemeier

Sarah J. Montgomery.

"You see this is a pretty wild place. But this whole country was like this once. You have seen it change. You and your fathers have, for the most part, performed the work that has made it what it is. You and your fathers did this for some one else. Can't you do as much now for yourselves?"

On order and morality in Mound Bayou: "I attribute it to the force of public opinion. The regulations that we enforce have public sentiment behind them. The people recognize that the laws, when they are enforced, represent the sentiment of the community and are imposed for their own good. It is not so easy for them to realize that where the government is entirely in the hands of white men."

Halter Sillers (on I.J. Montgomery):

In the building of Mound Bayou into a prosperous, law abiding, Christian community, he has performed a greater service than any member of his race; for he has demonstrated the fitness of his people, their capacity for self-government, their ability to establish and maintain a creditable civilization; and in doing this, he has done more than all the other leaders of his race have done since the day of the proclamation of emancipation.

A TOUR OF Mound Bayou



Dozens of Mound Bayou residents served as soldiers in World War I and World War II.

1 City Hall

Portraits of the City's mayors adorn the entryway.

2 Mary C. Booze Home:



Constructed in 1910, and located in the Montgomery Square of the original plat at 308 S. West Main Avenue. Mary Booze became a national Republican committeewoman in 1924 and served for many years. The home has served as residence

and office of Dr. T. R. M. Howard and residence of Dr. E. P. and Mrs. Burton.

3 Isaiah Tecumseh Montgomery Home:



Constructed in 1919 and home of a co-founder of Mound Bayou, Isaiah Tecumseh Montgomery, the only Black delegate to the 1890 Mississippi Constitutional Convention. The building is currently owned by the Knights &

Daughters of Tabor, and since Montgomery's death in 1924, the home has served as a Teachers Home, Nurses Home, and private residence. Exterior renovations were begun with a Save America's Treasures grant through the National Trust for Historic Preservation and matched by the Mississippi State Legislature, and the Mississippi African-American Heritage Preservation Grant Program totaling more than \$110,000. Funds are needed to complete the interior work for putting the home to a new use. The home has been designated a National Landmark by the U.S. Department of the Interior.



4 Site of the former Eva P. Francis Home:

Widow of B. T. Green, co-founder of Mound Bayou. Mrs. Green married John Francis after B. T. Green was killed in 1895.

5 The Bank of Mound Bayou Building:



Founded by Charles Banks, and constructed 1904-05, this was one of the first Black owned banks in Mississippi. The building subsequently housed the Mound Bayou Post Office, the Mound Bayou Foundation, the Headquarters of the International Order of Twelve Knights & Daughters of Tabor, the Office of E.P. Booze, and the Office of Mary C. Booze.

6 Site of the former Newton Hotel:

Built prior to 1909, it was a large two-story frame building designed and built especially for hotel purposes. "In the matter of sanitary surroundings in the way of rooming arrangements, and culinary excellence with reference to the matter of dining, the service at the Newton Hotel will satisfy the most rigorously exacting Customer," according to Aurelius P. Hood in 1909.

7 Creswell Home

Built around 1898 by Gorge W. Creswell, father of B. Howard Creswell, who became the fourth mayor of Mound Bayou.

8 Site of the former Miller Home:

Constructed in 1915, burned in 1997. Fred Miller was the Third General President of the Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity in 1911, and Mariah Green Miller was the daughter of a co-founder of Mound Bayou, Benjamin Green.

Highway 61 is one of the great American roads, running from the Gulf of Mexico to the

Canadian Boarder. It originally followed the rail line that transected the Delta, forming Mound Bayou's Main Avenue. It was later moved to the East of the rail line, and then to its present location West of town, outside the town limits.

U. S. Highway 61 (Edward Street) through Mound Bayou, Mississippi



9 Site of Charles Banks Home:



Built in 1908 and furnished at a cost of nearly ten thousand dollars and said to be "the most palatial residence in the delta section of the state..." "commodious enough to house a small-sized army..." Charles Banks was born March 25, 1873, in Clarksdale, Mississippi, served as Census Enumerator for the 1890 Census, and opened a mercantile business called Banks & Bro. in Clarksdale. In 1893 he married Trenna Ophelia Booze, who was born in Natchez, moved to Mound Bayou in 1903, and organized the Bank of Mound Bayou in 1904. He served as Cashier, organized the Mississippi Negro Business League in June, 1905. He was an organizer and promoter of the Booker T. Washington tour of Mississippi in 1908, helped in founding the Negro colony of Peace, Arkansas, and died October, 18, 1923, at the Wilson Hospital in Memphis, Tennessee.

First Baptist Church:

The first church in Mound Bayou where all denominations worshiped together was erected in 1888 as a Brush Arbor under which community services were held. This Brush Arbor served as a meeting ground until 1891 when the Green Grove Baptist Church was erected. In 1905, under the leadership of Rev. A.A. Cosey, a brick building (one of the first brick churches in Bolivar County) replaced the Brush Arbor. The present structure was erected in 1961 under the leadership of its pastor, Rev. L. J. Jordan, Jr.



11 Site of the former Mound Bayou Oil Mill and Manufacturing Co.:



Dedicated November 25, 1912 by Dr. Booker T. Washington at a ceremony that was attended by more than 15,000 persons, it was described as, "the largest thing of the kind ever under taken by Negro people." Thomas W. Cook was the constructing architect, and his younger brother W. H. Cook was the construction foreman. Julius Rosenwald, CEO of Sears, Roebuck, and Company, was a primary investor. The venture was an offspring of the Mississippi State Negro Business League, an auxiliary branch of the National Negro Business League. Later the site of Dr. T. R. M. Howard's Medical Clinic, the Green Parrot Inn Restaurant, the first concrete swimming pool for Blacks in the Delta, the Sarah Brown Hospital of the United Order of Friendship of America, and the Dental Clinic of Mound Bayou Community Hospital and Delta Health Center. Today, the former Sarah Brown Hospital building is home of the Kemetic Institute which uses Mound Bayou heritage to enrich after-school learning programs. The remains of the former public swimming pool are still visible next door.

12 JFK High School



Named in honor of President John F. Kennedy, the school opened in the fall of 1964.

13 Taborian Hospital Building:



Constructed in 1940 by McKissack and McKissack, largest Black construction company, the hospital was built by the International Order of Twelve Knights & Daughters of Tabor. It was the second oldest Black hospital in Mississippi. When the Taborian Hospital opened in 1942, the final cost of construction was over \$100,000. The facilities included two major operating rooms, an x-ray room, a sterilizer, incubators, an electrocardiograph, a blood bank, and a laboratory.

14 Taborian Administration Building:

Constructed in 1953 at a cost of \$30,000 under the leadership of Sir Perry Montoe Smith. The International Order of Twelve Knights and Daughters of Tabor was founded in 1872 by Moses Dickson, a free Black man in Ohio who had fought in the Civil War. Like other fraternal organizations, The Knights of Tabor featured secret passwords and initiations, and organized drill teams. The major membership benefits were burial and health insurance. While providing health care, the society dedicated itself to "Christianity, education, morality, and temperance, and the art of governing, self-reliance and true manhood and womanhood."

15 Site of the former Bolivar County Training School:

Constructed in 1919 at a cost of about \$70,000, the building was designed by black architect M. M. Alsop. It was a modern three-story brick building and was for many years the only high school for Blacks in Bolivar County. It opened in 1920 with 16 class rooms, an auditorium seating 700, and an annual enrollment of 850. Students came from as far away as Vicksburg to take advantage of the education offered here.

16



**Cemetery
(Grave of Founders)**
Founders I.T. Montgomery and Benjamin T Green, and many of their descendants, are buried here.

17

Site of the former Mound Bayou Bottling Works:

Owned by Mr. and Mrs. M. E. Davis, this was the first company to bottle soft drinks in Bolivar County. The building on this site was constructed in 1910, and the company went out of business during the early 1930s.

18

American Legion Hut

Mound Bayou played an important role during WW II, as exemplified by these two quotes by Keith Somerville in the Bolivar Commercial newspaper on April 23, 1943: "The draft board refuses to tell us how many of our colored boys have gone into the armed forces, but we all know that there are thousands of them from Bolivar County and many additional hundreds have volunteered." And "Why up at Mound Bayou during March they bought more War Bonds than either Cleveland or Rosedale!" A bronze memorial marker honoring World War I and II veterans is located on the grounds of the American Legion Hut.

19

Site of the Train Depot:



Built in 1900 by the Yazoo & Mississippi Valley Railroad, subsidiary of the Illinois Central. It was the only site of Jim Crow signs in Mound Bayou, and the "Colored"

waiting room was larger and finer than that for "Whites". The rail service was discontinued during the 1980s, the building was sold and was moved to the east side of town where it was converted into a residence.

20

Site of Carnegie Library:



Completed in 1910, the Library was built at a cost of \$4,000, donated by Andrew Carnegie. It was designed and constructed by Thomas W. Cook. It served as a center of educational activities. The building burned during the 1930s.

21 St. Gabriel's Mercy Center



Operated by the Sisters of Mercy, this Catholic charity provides after school and elder care programs, and hosts the public library of Mound Bayou.

22 Peter's Pottery

The Woods brothers hand craft art pottery that draws customers from all over the US. Peter's Pottery, and the famous McCarty's Pottery in nearby Merigold, are two examples of the artistic creativity that the Delta still produces.

23 Delta Health Center

The Delta has seen many cooperative farming ventures that were designed to help the poor by providing food, housing, and sometimes, health care. Most of these ventures have come and gone, but their legacy lives on in the Mound Bayou area. In 1967, Tufts University opened The Tufts Delta Health Center to provide medical care for impoverished people of the Delta. The Center took a holistic approach, and included clean water, sanitation, and environmental health in its purview.

Coincidentally, they also integrated Mound Bayou because their white medical staff needed the safety provided by that town. They also established The North Bolivar County Farm Cooperative, a 427 acre farm that distributed produce to the poor. The Health Center is now federally funded, and no longer connected to Tufts. It provides quality health care to the region. The farm co-op quickly evolved into the Mound Bayou Farmers Cooperative, and then gave rise to the Sweet Potato Growers Association Co-op in Mound Bayou, which provides Glory Foods® with the raw ingredients for their Glory Foods Mound Bayou Sweet Potatoes. Alcorn State University is a partner in this association. Today, the Delta Health Center continues to provide quality health care to the citizens of the Delta although it is no longer associated with a cooperative farming venture.

"As I look at it, Mound Bayou is not merely a town; it is at the same time and in a very real sense of that word, a school. It is not only a place where a Negro may get inspiration, by seeing what other members of his race have accomplished, but a place, also, where he has an opportunity to learn some of the fundamental duties and responsibilities of social and civic life.

Negroes have here, for example, an opportunity, which they do not have to the same degree elsewhere, either in the North or in the South, of entering simply and naturally into all the phases and problems of community life. They are the farmers, the business men, bankers, teachers, preachers. The mayor, the constable, the aldermen, the town marshal, even the station agent, are Negroes"

"During the twenty years this town has been in existence it has always had the sympathetic support of people in neighboring white communities. One reason for this is that the men who have been back of it were born and bred in the Delta, and they know both the land and the people."

From *My Larger Education, Being Chapters from My Experience*.
Booker T. Washington. 1911.



Milburn Crowe tells an interesting story about the cow pictured in this photograph taken in the backyard of his family's farm house near Mound Bayou. As Crowe recalls, the cow was more valuable than just the milk it produced. It funded part of his sister's education. "My mother was sending my older sister, Barbara, to take music lessons from Mts. Henrietta Clay, and in payment for some of the lessons she sent her cow across so Mrs. Clay could gather milk. She would milk the cow for a period of time and then send it back over."



The Crowe Family

Milburn Crowe was born in Mound Bayou in 1933 and serves as the town's historian. His father was one of the earliest settlers.

The Crowes, like most of the African-American town's other leading families, enjoyed the good life. Many of the photographs submitted by Milburn Crowe show residents relaxing on the front porches of well-built homes. At the bottom of this page, Crowe and his sisters are playing on their family farm. The people of Mound Bayou traveled regularly, often to Chicago to visit relatives who had moved there during the Great Migration.



Most of the photographs in the Crowe collection were taken by Milburn Crowe's aunt Mattie Thompson, who was better known as "Aunt Goldie." As Crowe explains, "One of her hobbies was to take pictures, and she had the habit of writing on the face of her photographs, which has helped me identify many of them. She would sign them on the side 'snapped by Goldie.'"

Aunt Goldie's handwriting explains what she and her sister are doing in the photograph below: "Watering plants on Grandmother's grave." But

the image recalls an even starker story for Crowe. "This is at their grandmother's grave in Chicago in the Lincoln cemetery. Their grandmother was born into slavery. And when she was a baby, she was found nursing on her mother, who was found dead on a pallet one morning after being beaten in the

field the day before. So this lady in the grave as a baby was found nursing as her mother lay dead."

*Watering plants on
grandmother's grave.
May 30, 1935.
Bernice M. Hallie.*



The Delta Center *for Culture & Learning*

Delta State University

The Delta Center for Culture and Learning is an interdisciplinary program within Delta State University. Its mission is to promote the broad understanding of the history and culture of the Mississippi Delta and its significance to the rest of the world. Its activities include classes, field trips and tours, oral history projects, historic preservation efforts, and service learning and community outreach programs.

Text by Milburn Crowe, John Martin, and Luther Brown. Design by Allison Melton.

This project was supported by a grant from the Cleveland-Bolivar County Chamber of Commerce and the Bolivar County Board of Supervisors.



Master Vernon Wallace
is his grandmother's favorite
child. He is a talented boy.
He loves to play with his
A Prize Winning Snipe & the others.



Miss Thompson's picture 7/10/104.

I can remember coming to Mound Bayou, and as soon as I was down at the South end, at the service station...I could just take a deep breath and relax."

— Nerissa Norman

The Delta Center
for Culture & Learning

Delta State University
Dr. Luther Brown, Director
Box 3152 Cleveland, MS 38733
phone: 662-846-4312
lbrown@deltastate.edu
www.blueshighway.org

